

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA March 5, 2023

Evangelism

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The journey of faith is a complicated one. We're going to encounter two particularly important stories of faith journeys this Sunday and next Sunday. And they are going to illustrate two very different encounters with the Word of God, Jesus Christ; as well as two very different responses to that encounter. And I have a feeling that most of us gathered together here this morning will relate more to the encounter we just read about between Jesus and Nicodemus than the one we will read next Sunday. That tendency can be seen in how Lutheran approach faith in a variety of ways, including and especially evangelism.

Lutherans have a reputation for being bad at evangelism. I'm not sure that reputation is entirely deserved. Could we be better at sharing our faith and proclaiming the Gospel? Yes, absolutely. But I do find that many Lutherans **are** willing to talk to others about what they believe. However, I do think we tend to approach evangelism from a rather limited and binary way. We tend to try to do evangelism from the point of view of Nicodemus. But Jesus is trying to invite Nicodemus to expand his understanding of faith and relationship with God. And I believe that were we to take that same lesson to heart we'd find evangelism easier and more effective.

At the end of the day, Nicodemus is trying to logic his way to faith. Sound familiar? It should! After all, most Lutherans prefer this method too. And not just for their own personal spiritual growth; that over-emphasis on logic and reason plays itself out in other aspects of faith and life too. And Jesus' response to Nicodemus, and to us, should get us to slow down and reconsider that over-emphasis: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."¹

¹ John 3:8 (NRSVUE)

The Holy Spirit, the fount and source of all faith, is like the wind, Jesus teaches. You can see its effects on the world, but you cannot predict it or identify its beginning nor its end. Being born of the spirit means responding to God in a whole and complete way. Others can clearly see the effects of the Holy Spirit on you, in you, and through you; and that same spirit will surprise us with how it grows to encompass more and more of our identities. But we can't logic our way to being born of the spirit any more than we can logic our way to faith.

Now please don't hear me as saying logic is useless or anything like that! Logic and reason play a part in the journey of faith. But it is only a part, not the whole. And part of the unpredictability of the Spirit means that the journey of faith varies from person to person. For some, logic and reason play miniscule roles in their faith; for others they are foundational. The difficulty arises when we start to believe that the way we walk our journey of faith is **THE ONE RIGHT AND TRUE AND ONLY WAY**. That's simply not how the Spirit works! It's just not that predictable or knowable.

The witness of scripture shows that God meets people where they are and then accompanies them on their journey of life and faith. Jesus sees in Nicodemus the propensity for literalism and an over-emphasis on reason and he reminds him that there's more to faith than such things. Thus begins the next stage of Nicodemus' faith journey. Unfortunately, we don't really get to find out how things end up with him, he's mentioned only two more times in this Gospel.²

With such an ambiguous end to his journey, the best we can do is name our hopes for Nicodemus. I hope and pray that he left that encounter with Christ with an openness to the movement of the Spirit that relied less on logic and reason as the be-all and end-all of faith. I hope and pray that Nicodemus left that encounter wondering about the other ways the Spirit may have been nudging and prompting him while on his journey. I hope and pray that Nicodemus eventually came to the realization that faith requires a whole and complete response to God.

That's the point we see Jesus making in this encounter we read today, and it will be the same point made in our reading next Sunday. The response and results will be different, but the invitation by Christ is always the same. Encountering God's Word, Jesus Christ, seems to mean being seen and met

² John 7:50 and John 19:39

where you're at and being challenged/prompted/taught that God is ever more and ever greater than we realize. God's Spirit works in wider and more powerful ways than we can ever imagine. Prepare to be surprised, and occasionally caught off guard, by the work of the Holy Spirit!

Not only that, but these two encounters also teach us that God wants all of us. Not just one part of us. God doesn't want to be in relationship with just our intellect, or just our emotions, or just our bodies. No, our God is a jealous God, not in a wrathful way, but in a salvific way. God wants all of us because God redeems all of us. God wants our whole selves because God loves us as whole human beings. God created us to be full and complete human beings, is it any wonder that God wants all parts of ourselves to be in relationship with God?

This foundational element of God, this desire to love us as whole human beings, should teach us about evangelism. When we share our faith it is right and good to use reason and logic, but it is also right and good to use service and vulnerability. It's important to understand that the people around us are complicated, messy, beautiful, amazing humans who are more than just their intellect, more than just their emotions, more than just their actions, more than...more than...more than.

To truly evangelize we need to follow the example of Christ. We need to meet people where they are, recognize them as full, complicated human beings who were made in the image of God. Once we've recognized that, our next step in evangelizing is simply to walk with them on their journey, our shared journey. And while we walk together, we are called to listen, engage, serve, share, forgive, teach, learn, advocate, heal, protect, and most of all, to love.

"For God so loved the world..." we read in that most-famous verse of John's Gospel. That's kind of an abstract sort of thought, but we see it in action right here! God met and loved the literalistic and pedantic Nicodemus. Next Sunday we'll hear of God meeting and loving the broken, shame-filled woman at the well. God has met and will meet all sorts of hungry, desperate, and oppressed people...and God will love them and walk with them. God meets you where you're at too. And God loves the complicated, messy, literalistic, pedantic, broken, shame-filled, hungry, hurting YOU and God walks alongside of you on your journey. And in the end, that's all evangelism is...walking together with someone and with God, out of love. Love for them and love for God. So, who will you walk beside today? Amen.